

century critical responses to “Song,” but also has prefaced them with his own approachable but erudite commentary. For example, in the “Nineteenth-Century Responses and Criticism” section, Greenspan notes in the preface to the infamous Rufus Griswold 1855 review of *Leaves*, “Griswold’s assault was not to be easily dismissed. It fairly expressed the hostility of social, religious, and cultural conservatives to Whitman’s assault on their cathedral of taste and portended the depth and breadth of antagonism that *Leaves of Grass* would incite for the remainder of the century” (55). Even while nicely condensing this ideological divide, Greenspan latches onto key terms that students will readily recognize and opens the door to supplemental pedagogical work. Or, in characterizing the leitmotif of nineteenth-century reviewers’ rhetoric, Greenspan states: “The review nicely exemplifies several practices common in nineteenth-century reviews. One is the heavy reliance on excerpts, a norm in the era’s often subjective style of formal reviewing and freer circulation of both copyrighted and uncopyrighted texts than in our time. Another is an editorial license unacceptable by twentieth-century standards, evidenced here by [Charles A.] Dana’s heavy-handed policy of inserting his own titles to the verse excerpts from *Leaves*.” Thus, in a deft stroke, Greenspan has evoked copyright politics in an age of downloading, which invites discussion of the circulation of texts in social and cultural spaces, as well as the refashioning of authorial material in an age of hypertext.

In the “Twentieth-Century Responses and Criticism” section, Greenspan has assembled the most eclectic group of readings that I have seen in any critical companion to Whitman’s work. The breadth of the critics’ span includes classic textual echoes like Ezra Pound’s “A Pact” (1915), as well as an excerpt of feminist autobiography like Alicia Ostriker’s “Loving Walt Whitman and the Problem of America” (1992), and an excerpt from Karen Sanchez-Eppler’s cultural materialist *Touching Liberty: Abolition, Feminism, and the Politics of the Body* (1993). The most tantalizing inclusion is Michael Gold’s “Ode to Walt Whitman” (1935), a mock heroic poem from the socialist agitator that demonstrates just how proletarian Whitman’s verse can become: “Sing sing O new pioneers with Father Walt / Of a strong and beautiful America / . . . Of sun, of moon, of Communism and joy in the wind / . . . It will come! It will come! The strikes foretell it! / . . . Deep in the gangrened basements / Where Walt Whitman’s America / Aches, to be born —.” The allusions, textual echoes, and intertextual threads in Gold’s ode align him with the generations of socialists and Marxists who have found in Whitman’s epic poem a hymn of their own transformative horizon. In this pivotal edition and sourcebook, Greenspan has given us polyvocal platforms on which we can launch pedagogical inquiries with our students, and he provides an enriching textual canvas that opens rather than closes the doors of our competing (but always cognate) critical voices.

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LUKE MANCUSO

FRED HERSCH ENSEMBLE. *Leaves of Grass*. New York: Palmetto Records, 2005. Compact Disc, 62 minutes.

When I wrote the entry, “Whitman’s influence on Music,” for *Walt Whitman: An Encyclopedia*, some twelve years ago now, I little expected that the next development in the ongoing fascination with Whitman’s poetry would be a jazz treatment of the

works. Yet now Fred Hersch, a leading jazz pianist and composer, has appeared with just that: a setting of “Song of Myself,” as well as a number of other selections from Whitman’s poems. The result places the poems in a new context, one that I believe Walt would have loved, and that helps us to appreciate the poems anew.

In an introductory essay in the liner notes, Hersch confesses that Whitman has been a lifelong inspiration, ever since he first read him in an American literature course at the New England Conservatory. He has now turned his love of the poet into a long piece of music, with the assistance of his own jazz ensemble, made up of Ralph Alessi, trumpet, flugelhorn; Mike Christianson, trombone; Bruce Williamson, clarinet, alto sax, bass clarinet; Tony Malaby, tenor sax; Erik Friedlander, cello; Drew Gress, bass; and John Hollenbeck, drums, percussion. Kate McGarry and Kurt Elling sing, at times speak, and occasionally chant the lines. The piece and the performance will be familiar to anyone who attended the 150th Anniversary conference last March in Lincoln, Nebraska, or the Sesquicentennial Symposium last September in Trenton, New Jersey, where Hersch and his group held forth.

Hersch has set a seemingly daunting task for himself: how to set Whitman, and especially “Song of Myself,” into a jazz idiom that will remain true to the work and, at the same time, capture its essence in an hour. This is only a third of the duration of at least one other setting of the poem, by Robert Sanders, for “Narrator, Soprano, chorus, and a brass/percussion ensemble,” first performed in 1970. To accomplish his purposes, Hersch has elected not to be all-inclusive; he has chosen instead to make judicious selections, tending to omit the more famous lines and, at the same time, constructing a seamless poem of his own. Thus he has reduced “Song of Myself” from its 1346 lines to less than one hundred.

Hersch’s jazz style could be characterized as “cool contemporary.” The ensemble listed above perhaps suggests a big band sound, yet for a good bit of the time it is simply Hersch on piano, with a bass, accompanying the vocalists. The new context brings the words alive in a fresh way. But the prevailing tone here is intimate, with the focus on the words themselves. This is not what characterizes the current manner of pop-rock-fusion, whatever mode one might wish to name, where the music is deafening and the words often unintelligible. Indeed this is probably closer to a classical music approach, and perhaps it is no surprise therefore that Hersch has turned up accompanying opera diva Renee Fleming on her most recent CD devoted to pop standards.

It is clear that Hersch has read broadly and deeply, and that he knows his Whitman. He describes the selection process in the album’s notes: “After much internal debate, I chose not to include any of the Civil War poems, the New York poems, the Calamus (the so-called gay) poems, nor did I use some of Whitman’s other most famous poems (‘When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d,’ ‘O Captain, My Captain’). Rather, I found myself drawn to entire poems, titles of poems and sections of larger poems that conveyed universal and inclusive sentiments: appreciation of the present moment, wonder at the miracle of nature in all its forms, freedom to be oneself and express that openly, and above all, open-hearted love of all beings. The words I ultimately selected reflect Whitman as philosophically akin to Thoreau, Emerson, or the Buddha—profoundly spiritual, but not related to the God of the traditional New England religion of his day. Whitman’s unique life was an example: he practiced what he advocated.”

Hersch’s criteria of selection seem to be both personal and philosophical-spiritual.

He has taken his work seriously, and we must therefore experience the work not as some light jazz entertainment, but as something more profound and moving. Even a cursory skim-through will reveal some of that intent. It is a recording that repays repeated listening.

How is the piece laid out, and how does it develop? Overall, there are two parts, the first being much the longer, opening with “A Riddle Song” (instrumental overture), continuing with “Song of the Universal” and “Whoever You Are Holding Me Now in Hand,” and moving directly into the setting of “Song of Myself.” The second part consists of six poems: “The Mystic Trumpeter,” “At the Close of the Day” (instrumental interlude), “To You / Perfections,” “The Sleepers,” “Spirit That Form’d This Scene,” “On the Beach at Night Alone” (instrumental interlude), “After the Dazzle of Day” (all titles given as they appear in the CD notes).

Hersch really follows two conventions, one related to music and the other to poetry. He begins with something of an overture: “A Riddle Song” which is purely instrumental, and which sets out some of the musical as well as the (implied) poetical themes that will be developed later on (“That which eludes this verse and any verse, / Unheard by sharpest ear . . . Which vocalist never sung, nor orator nor actor ever utter’d, / Invoking here and now I challenge for my song”). This is followed by a setting of “Song of the Universal”: “Come said the Muse, / Sing me a song no poet has yet chanted, / Sing me the universal.” Hersch’s treatment of this poem illustrates his method throughout. He chooses the first three lines, five lines from early in the last stanza, and then four concluding lines. All of this emerges as a seamless poem in its own right. His method illuminates the problem of setting poetry to music, or for that matter in setting anything to music. A composer probably should follow the “less is more” principle, since relatively few lines of poetry can be turned into a substantial composition. It is a problem opera composers have faced in making adaptations of novels or plays. I’m thinking of recent settings of literature like William Bolcom’s “McTeague,” John Harbison’s “Great Gatsby,” or Andre Previn’s “A Streetcar Named Desire.” All were ambitious projects but were not totally successful, perhaps because they tried to be too inclusive. That Hersch was able to solve this problem, especially in “Song of Myself,” is a tribute to his sensitive and perceptive appreciation of Whitman.

Hersch’s “Song of Myself” opens with the first three lines, followed by lines 30-37. The interesting thing here is the variety of rhythms he employs. “I celebrate myself” becomes a rhythmic motif repeated to the very end of the composition. Lines 30-32 are spoken, and lines 33-37—“Stop this day and night with me”—are set in something like a waltz tempo. Since the meters vary, these examples serve to illustrate Hersch’s flexibility and the fluidity of the jazz idiom in general, which allows for rhythmic variation and free association.

Part of the delight of the recording is the use of sound effects to underscore the lines. Thus a line like “I have heard what the talkers were talking” (line 38) has little squeaky sounds accompanying it. Similarly at the beginning of Section 26, lines 582-598, Kurt Elling, the soloist in most of the selections, speaks the lines beginning “Now I will do nothing but listen,” which are punctuated by appropriate noise from the band. For instance, “The ring of alarm bells, the cry of fire, the whirr of swift-seeking engines” (line 592) brings forth sounds imitating the bells, and “I hear the violincello” is of course accompanied by the cello.

But probably most impressive are passages such as lines 413-418, beginning “I

exist as I am, that is enough,” and concluding with “I can cheerfully take it now, or with equal cheerfulness I can wait.” The vocal line is accompanied by an upbeat tenor sax, a brilliant solo riff that gives energy and vitality to the section and the lines. This is followed by lines 433-434 and lines 444-447, “I am he that walks with the tender and growing night” and “far-swooping elbowed earth—rich appleblossomed earth!,” which are set to a slow romantic ballad-like song accompanied by the cello and bass as well as the piano. Finally, lines 1171 and following, early in Section 45, “My lovers suffocate me,” are set for a “wawa” mute on the trumpet (or is it a flugelhorn?), creating a mood that is itchy and sexy, steamy and suggestive and even amusing. Walt would have been delighted.

I hope it is evident that Hersch has created something new and fresh. In the process he has focused our attention on lines that might be lost otherwise, overshadowed as they may have become by more familiar ones. “Far swooping elbowed earth” is certainly one, and the treatment of “Now on this spot I stand with my robust soul” (line 1169) makes the word “robust” a memorable one. There are many more memorable moments and many more delights on the recording. The “Mystic Trumpeter,” featuring Kate McGarry, the selections from “The Sleepers,” and the final “After the Dazzle of Day” underline Hersch’s creativity and inventiveness, as well as the professional skill of his ensemble.

It might be interesting to speculate about the audience for this recording and these settings. Certainly anyone who has a passing interest in Whitman would find great pleasures in the CD. It may even produce some interest in Whitman in people who know little or nothing about him. In addition I suppose there are a number of jazz aficionados who will welcome a skilled representation such as this. But still, I wonder what the potential commercial value of such a release might be. Perhaps it is sufficient that it has been produced, and one certainly wishes it success. It is a CD that richly repays repeated hearings, and it is one that resists being used as background or easy-listening. Emerson at the end of his great essay “Circles” says: “The one thing which we seek with insatiable desire, is to forget ourselves, to be surprised out of our propriety, to lose our sempiternal memory and to do something without knowing how or why; in short to draw a new circle.” It seems to me that Fred Hersch has done just that.

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LYMAN LEATHERS

